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INFO RUEHRH/AMEMBASSY RIYADH PRIORITY 8611
RUEHDH/AMCONSUL DHAHRAN PRIORITY 0179
RUEHXX/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE
RUEHZM/GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COLLECTIVE
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 JEDDAH 000460

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ARP, NEA/PPD, SE/S-O, CA/OCS/ACS-NEA;
DEPARTMENT PLS PASS TO US GEOLOGICAL SERVICE

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TAGS: [AEMR](#) [ASEC](#) [CASC](#) [ECON](#) [KPAO](#) [PGOV](#) [SA](#) [SENV](#)
SUBJECT: LATEST ON JEDDAH FLOOD -- COMPENSATION,
INVESTIGATION, AND HOPING THE DAM HOLDS

REF: A. JEDDAH 0457
[B](#). JEDDAH 0456

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Classified By: Consul General Martin R. Quinn for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY. In an announcement that SMSed its way around Jeddah late yesterday evening, King Abdullah ordered immediate payment of SR 1 million (USD 267,000) to the surviving families of each victim of last Wednesday's catastrophic flood. The royal decree created a high-level commission to investigate the causes of the disaster, punish those who were negligent, and assess preventive measures as city clean-up work proceeds at an impressive pace. The King's actions were lead headlines in most papers, the flood story consuming the first seven pages of the Arabic daily Okaz. The Saudi Government, primarily through Mecca Governor Khalid Al Faisal, has been pro-active in what appears to have been a successful effort to calm public fears stirred yesterday (Monday) afternoon by a report that leaks in the Misk Lake dam might cause raw sewage water to spill through the city of Jeddah -- especially if more rain arrives over the local Thursday-Friday weekend. Simultaneously, the political "blame game" is ratcheting up in an uncharacteristically public manner with increasingly outspoken criticism of officials in the Jeddah Municipality, beginning with the mayor. END SUMMARY.

Royal compensation with fingers pointing ...

[1](#)2. (C) News of King Abdullah's announcement of a generous compensation package of SAR 1 million (\$267,000) for the families of persons who perished in the Wednesday Flood made its way around Jeddah dinner tables at around 10 p.m. yesterday evening, amid expectation that the King would deal sternly with those identified as responsible for the disaster. Stories are circulating about fraudulent contractors making millions in profits on incompetently-installed storm drainage systems in which manhole covers with no connecting pipe work were placed around the city to demonstrate that the chronic drainage problem had been "fixed." Fingers point to greedy contractors and officials who approved the contracts, primarily the Jeddah Municipality, including the mayor himself, successful

businessman Engineer Adel Faqih. Outraged Jeddah residents feel that while the mayor has articulated his vision of the city in a recently unveiled 20-year development plan, he has been in office long enough to have fixed "the mess of corruption" he inherited and thus should be sacked. Others feel that those around the mayor, the deputies and underlings, are more to blame. The most cynical perspective is that the mayor himself will be spared, but authorities "will find some poor guy to take the fall." One contact assumes that now the King's attention has been engaged the much-needed repairs to Jeddah's infrastructure will be "fast-tracked," costing something like \$3 billion -- "or 3 times what it would normally cost." The businessman smiled, "That's just the way it always works here."

Royal decree promises punishment

13. (U) The salient language of the royal decree, loosely translated, reads as follows:

"The disaster was not a result of extraordinary or out-of-control hurricanes or floods as we know them. It was the result of a rainstorm that cannot be described as disastrous.... Many countries around the world have a similar rainfall amount (3 inches) almost everyday without causing them such losses and damages as we have seen in the Jeddah Governorate, including countries with fewer resources than the Kingdom.... As we bear responsibility before Allah to keep everybody in the country secure and safe, it is our

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duty to firmly face this issue and find out those responsible, either government departments or individuals contributing to this disaster, and firmly punish them for coming short of their duty."

Investigation to be led by princes

14. (C) As the number of casualties continues to rise, citizen outrage about the city's lack of preparation for the flood grows. One human rights group has already threatened a lawsuit on behalf of the families of flood victims. Although street protests are banned, a Facebook page entitled "Popular Campaign to Save the City of Jeddah" has become a popular conduit for publicly expressing anger at local officials for failing to provide proper sewage and drainage infrastructure. Some angry citizens, using their real names, posted links to official announcements of multimillion-dollar spending plans to update Jeddah's infrastructure. With some sources indicating that the final number of flood victims may be several times more than the 106 officially reported, Jeddawis are accusing SAG officials, princes included, of poor planning at the least and corruption over infrastructure spending at the worst.

15. (C) Mecca Governor Prince Khalid Al Faisal and Jeddah Governor Prince Mishal bin Majed have been named to head the investigation commission, which promises to mount a "massive inquiry" assessing personal and property losses. How deeply the inquiry probes will likely depend on the level of continued public outrage. Almost everyone we have spoken to in Jeddah expects that the fatality rate is far greater than the figures publicly disclosed. Jeddah's major fruit importer, Mohammed Sharbatly (protect), in what is probably a high estimate, said the actual death toll could rise to 600. (Sharbatly owns a "residential village" near Misk Lake.) Others expect the final tally to be 200-300.

Temporary panic over Misk Lake overflow

¶6. (SBU) Alarms raced around the Saudi and expatriate communities Monday afternoon that Misk Lake, consisting of mostly unprocessed sewage held in place by an earthen dam, was leaking and might be in danger of overflowing due to the rising water level, said to be four meters from the top. Situated in a dry river bed (or wadi), the lake, 10 meters deep, 125 meters above sea level, contains 50 million cubic meters of sewage water. The water is contained by three 18-meter-wide sand barriers which total 1.7 km in length. On a daily basis, Misk Lake receives the contents of 1,400 tanker trucks dumping raw sewage and is located about 40 km east of the Jeddah city center near Gwaiza, the neighborhood hardest hit by the flood -- and where the clean-up, removal of wrecked vehicles, and retrieval of bodies is ongoing. The "panic" was prompted by the Saudi Civil Defense decision to warn residents near the dam to evacuate their homes after leaking was detected in a secondary support lake. Fears were eased later in the day after a press conference by Prince Khalid, but not before some foreign consulates had warned their citizens to prepare to evacuate. Civil Defense officials later insisted that the dam was safe, the water is dropping, and there is "no imminent danger of the lake flooding the eastern districts of Jeddah." The US Consulate received a single call from an American living near the affected area who had heard of the evacuation and recalled U.S. Geological Service experts examining the Misk Lake dam (visible on Google Earth) several years ago and expressing the opinion at the time that if the dam ever broke, Palestine Street and half of Jeddah "would be ankle-deep in raw sewage."

... "not sure we want a mayor who is surprised"

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¶7. (C) COMMENT: In a more open display of public ire than is typical in Saudi Arabia, local media are luxuriating in coverage of the flood and its aftermath -- particularly now that the Hajj has been successfully concluded. Public anger is rising over lives and property lost due to perceived official negligence and preventable error. In a Saudi Radio English language interview Tuesday afternoon Al Watan columnist Abdullah Al Alami predicted that "heads will roll, not only from recent officials but also from the older ones."

Alami went on to castigate the Jeddah mayor in vividly uncompromising terms: "The mayor of Jeddah said he was surprised by what happened. I'm not sure we want a mayor who is surprised. We want a mayor who surprises us with his accomplishments." Other Jeddawis are circulating on the internet a clever mockery of the Jeddah Municipality's logo, spelling out the word in Arabic "al-khiyana" (treason, treachery, perfidy) in place of "al-imana" (municipality). While the day of reckoning for Jeddah city officials may be fast approaching, many eyes are focused on the official weather forecast (cloudy Wednesday with chance of showers Thursday or Friday) and whether more rain will bring more misery to the residents of Jeddah. END COMMENT.

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